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'B' for Brexit or for Belonging?

Lorena Georgiadou

Abstract In this article, I use my personal experience of being a UK-based EU national and researcher during 'Brexit' as a vehicle to explore how the 'rise of the right' may be affecting qualitative researchers, their practice, and the context in which their inquiry takes place. In particular, I explore the shift in my sense of belonging as a result of the Brexit vote and the impact that this has on my willingness to remain in Britain and on my research practice. I conceptualise 'belonging' as fluid and relational, and I highlight the central role that 'welcoming the other' can play in facilitating such processes. This then forms the foundation of my exploration of what I think we, as qualitative researchers, can do for our communities as a response to the recent political developments discussed in this special issue.

Keywords: *belonging, Brexit, welcoming the other*

June 23, 2016, 2 p.m.

I am quite excited about today. I've come to terms with not having a right to vote in this referendum. You see, it's not the first time I'm not participating in important political decision-making processes. In the 10 years I've lived abroad, I have missed out on six general elections and one referendum in my home country (Greece) and three general elections in my country of residence (United Kingdom). I accept this submissively – it was my choice to leave home after all – but with an undiminished interest in the process and the result. Today I'm eager to see the percentage with which the Remain side will win. Because I'm sure people are voting 'in'.

June 23, 2016, 10 p.m.

I'm still very excited. I've decided that I'm not going to bed tonight; I'll watch the results as they come in. I want to remember this. My laptop screen is on, a live news window on one side, a video call on the other. I'm sharing the

night with another UK-based EU-national friend who is slightly more concerned than I am.

– ‘Imagine if...’

– ‘Nope, it can’t happen. People are voting in’, I say dismissively.

June 24, 3:30 a. m.

I open my eyes, my laptop screen is still on, my friend is still there, and I realise that while I’ve dozed off, the results have been coming in. It takes me a few seconds to realise that ‘Brexit’ is happening. I am wide awake in a second. I feel paralyzed. Images and sounds reach me but don’t register. Then the journalist utters: ‘We are absolutely clear now that there is no way that the remain side can win’. ‘The British people have spoken, and the answer is: we’re out’. We. Are. Out. The words feel like a slap in the face. What does this mean for us? What does it mean for me?

The first question that we are tackling in this collection of articles invites us to explore the impact of recent political developments such as the election of Trump, Brexit, and the general spread of a global right-wing conservative authoritarian political movement on us, as qualitative researchers. Given the huge personal impact that Brexit has had (and continues to have) on me as a UK-based EU national, I have decided to locate my article exclusively in this context. This does not mean that I am not affected by the wider international political developments; on the contrary. I hope, however, that offering a more focused account will help you, my reader, connect with my story and will facilitate my exploration of the second question: how I think about (my) inquiry in the light of this. The consideration of the third and final question, that is, my thoughts in relation to moving forward as a community, will be from a more global perspective.

I moved to the United Kingdom back in 2008, and I have lived there (here) ever since. I’ve got a job, bought a flat, made friends, and integrated myself in the local community. This is home, this is where I have *chosen* to create a home. It has been suggested that for a person to ‘feel at home’, there needs to be ‘a combination of familiarity, security, community and sense of possibility’ (Yuval-Davis, 2010, p. 276). It has taken me a long time, effort, and personal sacrifices to develop this feeling at a place where I am not born or raised, where I have no family or childhood friends, and where the language spoken is different to my mother tongue. But I have finally made it. Or so I thought.

In line with other scholars who critique the rigidity that underpins the dominant discourses around home (Ahmed, 1999; Chawla & Holman Jones, 2015), I recognise that my sense of creating a home in a foreign place is neither fixed nor permanent. I endorse Wyatt and Wyatt's (2015) conceptualisation of home as 'multiple, fluid, transient, provisional, a process' (p. 32), yet what I focus on in this article is not my process of creating a home or my thinking around what/where home is but the shift in my experience of feeling at home in Britain in the aftermath of the Brexit vote.

The 'feeling at home' described above is commonly referred to as 'belonging'. Belonging is associated with social locations, i.e., positionings in time, space, and social power, as well as with normative values and identities (Yuval-Davis, 2010). Belonging is about 'emotional attachment' (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 197) and is highly relational. It says something about the relationship between personal identity and collective identity (Jones & Krzyżanowski, 2008), about 'me' and 'us'. One cannot belong in vacuum; we need others to feel part of 'something'. Kinship and social group membership are central here, but so are internal emotional and cognitive processes within the person.

So, one's sense of belonging develops as a combination of external and internal factors, of intersubjective and reflexive processes. The extent to which external and internal factors influence one's sense of belonging is context dependent and can vary greatly from person to person and from one historic moment to another. Jones and Krzyżanowski (2008) suggest that while there are cases where external validation has little value and 'belonging is about making a choice of "I belong"' (p. 48), others often shape and can even determine a person's sense of belonging through endorsement or exclusion from the 'in-group'. For example, formal denial of membership (e.g., rejection of one's application for citizenship) can have a huge impact on a person's link to their sense of collective identity regardless of their personal, internal positioning. Is this what happened to me? Did I perceive Brexit as a formal, external denial of my 'in-group' membership that shifted my sense of collective identity?

Given that belonging is relational and context dependent, I would expect it to be rather fluid, to fluctuate depending on circumstances and relationships. What was surprising for me to experience, however, was how quickly and abruptly my relatively robust sense of belonging vanished as a result of the referendum outcome. I am now wondering what happened to the internal sense of 'I belong' that I had constructed relationally over the years. Surely these relationships did not change overnight. While I had managed to protect myself from the rather offensive discourses that dominated Britain in the months leading up to the referendum, the moment I heard that the

British people voted to leave the European Union, I immediately passed – or, maybe, pushed myself – to the other side. I identified with ‘them’ – Europeans. I became an immigrant, one of those people who ‘come and steal jobs’ and whom the Leave supporters complain about. Perhaps my way of finding a new place to belong was by internalising such ‘common fallacious arguments for migrants’ (Wodak, 2008, p. 64) and by becoming one of ‘them’.

Indeed, the vote to leave evoked feelings of solidarity with other fellow Europeans (and non-Europeans) who may be in a worse position than me. ‘What about those who haven’t been here for as long as me? Those who can’t get a British passport, who don’t have a secure job – what will they do?’. It’s impressive – alarming – to realise that the divisive discourses of the prereferendum campaign are so easily, almost automatically, internalised and embodied, that my conscious efforts to avoid reinforcing stereotypes and reproducing divisive discourses had been replaced by my need to belong. I found refuge in constructing a ‘transversal us’, that is, ‘a collective sense of “us”, across borders and boundaries of membership, based on solidarity with regard to common emancipatory values’ (Yuval-Davis, 2010, pp. 277–278). It was us against them.

Feelings I had never experienced before started growing inside me, feelings of childish spitefulness that come from rejection: ‘If they don’t want me here, I don’t want to be here’. I became an ‘I’, distinctively separate from ‘them’ (British people) and certainly miles away from the previous sense of ‘us’ that I had constructed within my local community. It has been argued that, although in everyday life a person’s sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’ entails a complex ‘range of distinctions and relations between people’, such a ‘dichotomous, zero-sum way of constructing a boundary between me/us and them is, indeed, characteristic of situations of extreme conflict and war’ (Yuval-Davis, 2010, pp. 276–277). Is that what this is? Conflict and war? It certainly felt like it in the moment, and although this has subsided to a certain extent now, there are moments when it still does. My sense of ‘complete exclusion and negation’ led me to the ‘demonization of the Other’ (p. 277). This scares me. If a person like me, with a relatively strong sense of belonging and integration experienced such extreme emotions of hatred and vengefulness, what might be going on for more marginalised people? And what will the impact of such feelings be on the wider population’s lives from now on? Will we live in conflict and a divided society? Do I want this for myself and for those around me? It certainly does not sound appealing.

What about my research and my approach to inquiry more generally? The second question that we address in this collection invites me to explore how I am thinking about, or rethinking, (my) inquiry as a consequence of these developments.

As a social science researcher, I have committed myself to exploring the world around me. I am embedded in the social context that I investigate, and it shapes me as much as I shape it. I need to be interested and motivated, and I need to have a desire to contribute to this context, to offer something that is meaningful and that has an impact on society. Something that makes things better in a way. The feelings of uncertainty and rejection that I'm experiencing as a result of Brexit do not facilitate this process – they block me. In fact, from an ethical perspective, I wonder whether I can undertake high-quality research if my heart is not in it. Given that social research is 'inherently political and shaped by multiple ethical and political positions' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2002, p. x), can I bring myself to it again under these circumstances? If I feel disconnected, frustrated, and uncertain, am I in a position to engage with others and my inquiry with curiosity, openness, and reflexivity?

From a more pragmatic point of view, I see another difficulty. My research is concerned with multiculturalism, and particularly with intercultural and interlinguistic practice in higher education and in the counselling profession (Georgiadou, 2014, 2015, 2016; Georgiadou, Harries, Holtan, & Willis, 2015). This means that I research the experiences of people who are foreign, international, who are 'not from here'. Through my research I want to understand what it is like for them (us) to study, work, or live in the United Kingdom and how educators, employers, and society more broadly can better support them (us). Brexit seems to be having a big impact on UK-based EU nationals' views and plans of staying here, as well as in EU nationals' desire to come to the United Kingdom. For example, a recent report investigating 2,000 UK-based EU employees' plans after Brexit showed that 43% were considering, or actively planning on, leaving, with the main reason being that they feel less wanted and less valued (KPMG, 2017). Similarly, 49% of 1,000 EU citizens in their home countries said that Britain has now become a less desirable place to live and work (KPMG, 2017). In higher education, which is predominantly the focus of my inquiry, the situation is similar. The overall number of EU student applications to study at UK universities has dropped by 9% (Leng, 2016). Recent surveys reveal that 76% of EU academics are more likely to consider leaving the United Kingdom as a result of Brexit (Academics' Survey Shows Little Support for HE Bill, 2017), with the main reasons being the hostile atmosphere evoked by the Brexit rhetoric; the change (for the worse) of the inclusive, multicultural societal climate; the overall uncertainty; and a sense of 'diminished psychological safety' (Matthews & Elmes, 2017). If Brexit is making Britain a less multicultural, less inclusive, and less desirable place for 'foreigners', then does my research have a future or even a purpose here? I'm doubtful.

So where do we go from here? What does this community do now? The third question that we are addressing in this collection suggests a collective ‘we’ – a community of qualitative researchers. And even though the question itself does not suggest a shared geographical location for this community, for me, personally, membership of this community is inextricably linked to being physically in Britain. This is where I developed my researcher identity, and this is where my research took shape and flourished. English is the language that inspires and facilitates my reflexivity. This is my research ‘home’; this is where it (and I, as a researcher) belong(s). Perhaps naively I have developed a sense that if I were to leave Britain, I would also withdraw from qualitative research. I am not saying that I *could not* do research elsewhere, but at the moment, I *would not want to*; it would feel out of context to do so. So, for me, thinking about the third question means that ‘we’ stay together, that I, too, stay in Britain and continue to feel part of this community of qualitative researchers. But am I willing to do so?

I feel that my colleagues (some of whom are contributing articles in this special issue) would like me to stay here and keep going. They seem willing to fight for me, to fight for us, and I’m personally touched by this. Equally, members of my local community have shared with me their disappointment and frustration with the referendum outcome. During the initial postvote upheaval, a ‘local’ friend offered to adopt me ‘if worse comes to worst’. I feel very fortunate to live in a city that voted to remain by 74% to 26% (Edinburgh’s EU Referendum Results, 2016) and to work in an environment that openly endorsed the Remain side. Admittedly, this is proving sufficient for me – at least for now. Knowing that I’m wanted by those around me, that the Leave vote does not represent all of Britain, soothes my feelings of rejection and motivates me to keep going. Cooper (2009) elaborated on Levinas’ (1969) concept of ‘welcoming the other’ and discussed how by welcoming others, we help them feel more ‘integrated in the human community’ and become ‘more welcoming of themselves’ (Cooper, 2009, p. 121). This makes sense in the light of the earlier discussion on the intersubjective and relational nature of belonging and resonates with my personal experience.

Perhaps then, our role as qualitative researchers who engage with inquiry in the social sciences and humanities is not very different from our role as members of this society. We can welcome others by speaking up, by communicating our disagreement with such political developments, and by putting across a message of inclusivity in our respective communities. As researchers and academics, we have the opportunity to inspire, through our work, our students, colleagues, research participants, readers, and conference audiences and to facilitate a move away from the divisive discourses that have been dominating our lives recently. We can instil hope and

foster a sense of unity and solidarity that can be very helpful to people whose sense of belonging has been shattered. Examples of such practices that could be very helpful might include organising conferences or seminars and publishing academic papers with relevant foci (such as the ones in this special issue); actively engaging with the public beyond academia through, for example, social media platforms and public engagement events; simply talking to our colleagues and friends on a humane level; and showing an interest in the impact that these changes may be having on them. We may not necessarily be able to *change* what actually happens in people's lives in terms of their right to live and work in a place and their everyday circumstances, but we can influence how their everyday reality is experienced in terms of relationships and sense of belonging.

And perhaps, for some of us, there is scope in taking this a step further and making people feel welcome by actively inviting their voices to be heard. By concentrating our inquiry on such phenomena – e.g., the effect of such political developments on the directly affected populations – we can facilitate a more focused impact, increase societal awareness, and influence policies. This is how I personally choose to 'do my bit' in relation to the recent political developments discussed here. A year (plus) on from the Brexit vote, my thinking in relation to my inquiry has changed. I am not as doubtful about the purpose of my research as I described above. In fact, I wonder whether my research has even more meaning now than before. I am invested in this field, and I feel a certain degree of responsibility for populations who are 'not from here'. If I were to leave Britain and withdraw myself from the researcher community, it would feel as if I am giving up, as if I stopped caring for these people's experiences and needs, as if I am abandoning them (us), jumping off the sinking ship. I cannot do that, at least not yet.

I have therefore decided to hone my research in this direction and explore the emotional/psychological impact of such political developments on populations that are directly affected by such changes.¹ I feel that the lapse of time between the referendum vote and now, as well as my conscious exploration of the impact it has had (and keeps having) on me, provides sufficient critical distance to be able to undertake research in this direction. As I refocus my inquiry, I hope and anticipate it to have a two-fold impact: on the one hand, to raise knowledge and awareness of this currently unfolding phenomenon, potentially influencing policy-makers and stakeholders, and on the other, I hope that the active involvement of the impacted population in such inquiry, as well as the wide dissemination of relevant research outputs, will communicate a clear message to those directly affected that they are not alone, that they are wanted, that they (we) belong.

Note

1. I am working on a project titled 'Exploring Emotional and Psychological Well-being During "Brexit": A Case Study of EU Academics in Scotland'.

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About the Author

Lorena Georgiadou is lecturer in counselling, psychotherapy, and applied social sciences. Her inquiry explores intercultural and interlinguistic practices in counselling, higher education, and research. She is particularly interested in belonging and the impact that this has on people's well-being.